

COMMENTARY

PETLAND: A Woman's Life

©Susan Platt first published in *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 19:2(fall 1998) together with a photo collage based on PETLAND.

Installation artist Kathy Glowen first entered Mamie Rand's home in Spokane, Washington, in the Spring of 1994. She felt before she was told that it was a woman's house- no man had ever lived there. Mamie lived there with her mother, Minnie, and sister, Florence, when Florence was between marriages. By 1994 Mamie had been in a nursing home for ten years. Her neighbor, Esther Kline, had purchased the house and its contents in order to provide cash for Rand to get the care that she needed. When Glowen met Esther Kline at a family funeral in Spokane, Glowen discovered that Kline owned a house completely filled with all the material accumulation of a life that spanned the entire twentieth century.

Glowen's life has not been the same since that day.

Mamie Rand's life and Kathy Glowen's life are now interconnected, despite the fact that they met only three times before Mamie died in 1995 at the age of 101. At those three meetings, Glowen felt a sense of rapport with Mamie as well as common interests (offbeat knick-knacks) and passions (love of animals). She gained permission to make an artwork from Mamie's lifelong accumulation of objects.

Thus began an obsessive endeavor to create a story from the dozens of full and disordered boxes of Mamie's possessions, boxes that had been carelessly packed, broken into, and damaged. Moving boxes, and boxes, and more boxes to her studio in Arlington, Washington, Glowen began a dialogue with the woman who collected so many things, in some cases the very same things that Glowen herself collects. As an artist, Glowen has long pursued the practice of collaging found objects into layered and humorous statements. This installation, however, reverses her usual process of discovering materials for her work in thrift stores. Here, Glowen was given a mountain of material that belonged to a particular person; from it she has reverentially constructed a history of a woman, a multifaceted narrative that pays homage to Mamie.

PETLAND has many parts and many stories, but these are stories told with respect, from one woman to another, of a matriarchal world and a woman's life. In many ways, the story is unremarkable, typical of the period spanning the 1920s to the 1950s.

Mamie Rand's father, Frank P. Rand is closer to the category that we arbitrarily define as artist. When Mamie was a child, he was an itinerant photographer who went from one tiny town to another in Montana making penny postcards and then moving on. He was a would-be inventor of something called Mapeleat, a maple flavoring. Later, at Newman Lake, northwest of Spokane, he pursued spiritual experiences and utopian physical culture philosophies, and grew enormous sunflowers.

The centerpiece of Glowen's PETLAND installation is Mamie's Wall. Using only the materials from Mamie's house, Glowen here constructs a biography in two parts. Mamie's early years with her family, her schooling, her hobbies, particularly embroidery and piano playing, and even her social activities, are signified by such things as copy books, sheet music, and music books. Rand's musical interests were actually significantly more than a hobby. She played both the violin and the piano well enough to perform in

public and to be a music teacher. Stacks of magazines - Inside Detective, Home Arts, Physical Culture point to Mamie's other interests. Glowen ironed piles of Mamie's embroidered linens and miscellaneous pieces of material to include in this section in order to invoke one of the repetitious rituals of domesticity that were also part of Mamie's life.

The second part of Mamie's Wall refers to her adult career as a pet store owner and dealer in dogs, light brahmas a type of show hen that she raised from 1914 until the 1960s), goats, birds for pets (canaries, parakeets), cats, lizards etc. The magazines here are Milk Goat News, Washington Farmer, American Rabbit, Small Stock Magazine, Dogdom, Dog World. The objects include such things as boxes of fish food, flea killers, and dog medicines. Mamie ran her pet store Petland near the posh Pedicord Hotel in downtown Spokane in the twenties and thirties; her sister, Florence, ran the Bouquet Barber Shop nearby. As her business faltered during the depression, Mamie also worked as an accountant for True Oil Company and Hocking Drugstore in the 1930s. When her business began losing too much money, she ran her pet store out of her home in the 1940s. Glowen found stacks of supplies from the store still intact in the late 1990s.

The piles of old pet store supplies and magazines are only a small percentage of the total quantity of things that Glowen has used in Mamie's Wall. Glowen has created order from a stupefying accumulation of ordinary things, objects we all have around the house. Using the assemblage approach, she has put these objects into tidy compartments. In doing so, she has tidied up the chaos that she found in Mamie's ravaged house in 1994 and given us Mamie Rand's identity.

Glowen's careful arrangements in Mamie's Wall construct a fascinating narrative of a twentieth century life in the middle of America. Mamie Rand was not famous, she was not dramatic. But at the same time, she represents a type of woman who is heroic within her own sphere and on her own terms. She was not part of that much overvalued position, the avant-garde, because of where she lived and what she did, and who she was. But she was inspiring. Mamie Rand was an independent woman who never married, who ran several successful businesses, supported her mother and sister, even raised a foster child for a few years. and nurtured thousands of animals which she sold carefully to customers all over the country. This type of woman is not in the history books, the sociology books, or the art books. But she draws us because of her strength, her intelligence, her humor, and her passions. She is the type of woman who is still the backbone of any community. The woman who has a small business, who manages alone, who is tough, and forthright. We all know them. Their lives are not about power, but about people.

In other art works, Glowen carries on a dialogue with Mamie and her sensibilities as a collage artist are more obviously present. 100 hand-made dresses hang from special Glowen-designed hangers and become 100 Mamies that dance in the air in response to the breezes created by passing viewers. In "For Life," Glowen makes an even more intimate connection between the two women. She has used her own bed, an authentic pioneer bed from the same era as Mamie's youth, and Mamie's springs. A mountain of feed corn falls like an hourglass from its center suggesting the passage of time. Surrounding the bed is a circle of giant, luxurious pillows which are actually bags of feed corn. They become a family photographic display as well because Glowen enlarged and silk-screened Frank Rand's photographs of Mamie's early life on the covers.

Knick-Knack Handkerchiefs has rows of tiny handkerchiefs that hang from small shelves on which Glowen placed tiny dime store glass animals. In "Chickens Series," she arranged dozens of the first and second place ribbons that Mamie won for her brahma hens over many decades. The red and blue ribbons create a pattern on the wall and surround boxed collages using egg cartons and eggs. Food Will Win the War (Milk Piece) frames dozens of milk caps in an abstract pattern together with a newspaper commentary on the importance of raising food for the war effort. Underneath on a shelf Glowen has placed milk bottles, a spunky ceramic cow, and a surreal postcard of children drinking by a tube directly from a cow's udder. It is both amusing and respectful. More symbolic works include Let Your Light Shine, which makes a reference to religion, or Little Shirt, which marks the years with her foster daughter, Francis. Glowen has even made a piece that celebrates Mamie's elegant business shorthand.

Glowen's husband, Ron Glowen is the contemporary counterpart to Mamie's father, creating a record of the outside, public spaces where Mamie lived. He has photographed the house in Spokane and created a mountain-shaped installation from her father's penny postcards that documents the dozens of small towns in Montana that they moved through in Mamie's early years. Is this the male world? These places seem so distant and peripheral compared to the interior intimacy of the things from which the rest of PETLAND is constructed.

PETLAND is a woman's land. It is a story of survival, of strength, of a woman who as I wrote in a note to myself as I was leaving the exhibition, "absolutely knew who she was." It is that quality that I found so hypnotic. Here is no neurotic, repressed, frustrated person. Here is a woman who used her talents to live a life on her own terms.

Mamie Rand's pet store was close to the Pedicord Hotel and her sister's Bouquet Barbershop served the fashionable clientele of that hotel in its heyday. The Pedicord, in its later years, became an SRO (single room occupancy) hotel for men at the bottom. It has been immortalized by Edward and Nancy Kienholz, who bought all of its forties-era furniture when it was being torn down. The Kienholzes created installations with this Pedicord furniture that refer to the same time frame as PETLAND, the mid twentieth century, but the Pedicord SRO is a sad, lonely, empty world of men who are waiting for death.

Mamie Rand, as framed by Kathy Glowen's labor of love, comes to us as passionate and alive. Even in her last days, she was still reading Agatha Christie novels and cracking jokes. I'll take the woman's world any day. Glowen's glowing emblematic work, Dress of Years, with its christening dress bearing one hundred one tags, one for each year of Mamie's life, declares the victory of both Mamie and of PETLAND.